

OUTLAW MOTORCYCLE GANGS

Some members of outlaw motorcycle gangs are responsible for serious criminal offences and form part of organised crime networks. They have developed a strong presence in several illicit markets, particularly the illicit drug market.

NATURE OF OUTLAW MOTORCYCLE GANGS

Almost 40 motorcycle clubs linked to criminal activities in Australia describe themselves as outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs). The reference to ‘outlaw’ is not a legal definition, rather it refers to their view of themselves as operating outside the law.¹ Specifically, OMCGs describe themselves as the ‘one percenters’. If 99 per cent of motorcyclists operate within the law society’s conventions, they see themselves as the one per cent who don’t.

The criminal activities of OMCGs distinguish them from many recreational motorcycle riding clubs comprised of people who get together solely for the purpose of riding their motorcycles and socialising (although some OMCGs claim to be simply recreational riding clubs).²

While they have become one of the more identifiable and high profile groups in Australia’s organised crime landscape, OMCGs are not typical of the majority of organised crime entities in Australia and their members do not pose more or less of an organised crime



threat than many other groups and individuals. Other syndicates or networks rarely aim for public identification. In contrast, OMCGs maintain websites, identify themselves through patches and tattoos, have written constitutions and bylaws, trademark their club names and logos, and have publicity campaigns.³

Australian OMCGs evolved from core groups of males who shared common interests, came from working class backgrounds, were Caucasian and sought to mirror the activities of OMCGs which were established overseas (originally in the United States) after the Second World War. Club members were soon expected to obey strict rules and a militaristic hierarchy that levied harsh and sometimes violent retribution for disobedience.

The Australian Crime Commission conservatively estimates that serious organised crime costs Australia between \$10–15 billion every year. This cost comprises loss of business and taxation revenues, expenditure on law enforcement and regulatory efforts, and through the social and community impacts of crime. Raising public awareness of crime issues is an important step in minimising the impact serious and organised crime can have on the community.



Australian Government
Attorney-General's Department
Australian Taxation Office





Admission to groups was once formally regulated by strict internal procedures, although this has been relaxed to counter declining membership and to strengthen positions against rival OMCGs.⁴ This, combined with Australia's increasing multi-cultural population and a desire to broaden spheres of interests, means the traditional Caucasian make-up of biker gangs has changed.⁵ There is now a strong Middle Eastern presence in a number of OMCGs. Some gangs do not work to a constitution and others include members who do not even ride motorcycles.

However, club culture does remain predominantly masculine and women are largely excluded.

OMCGs are characterised by a hierarchy divided into different regions, each with some autonomy, also referred to as chapters. Each chapter is headed by a president who has absolute rule and oversees the principles of brotherhood, loyalty and an enforced code of silence.⁶

The criminal activities of OMCG members range from social nuisance in residential communities through to their involvement in some of the most significant criminal syndicates operating in Australia today. There has always been a criminal element within OMCGs but in the majority of cases OMCG chapters do not engage in organised crime as a group. Rather, individual members may leverage

off the OMCG to aid their criminal activity. This may include enlisting the support of fellow members to recover debts or dissuade potential competitors; enhancing their status in criminal circles; or using the existence of chapters in different states, territories and sometimes other countries to exploit criminal opportunities.

OMCG chapters do however, pose a serious (if sporadic) risk to public safety because they are liable to react violently to attempts by rival OMCGs to poach their members or encroach on their 'territory'. In these circumstances, OMCG members have on a number of occasions (notably on the Gold Coast and at Sydney Airport) paid scant regard to the safety of innocent members of the public.

Organised crime threats usually arise from individual OMCG members or small numbers of members in a particular chapter who conspire with other criminals outside the OMCG for a common purpose. In some cases they may even be part of a network that includes members of another OMCG. There have also been instances of OMCG chapter members competing against each other as part of rival organised crime networks in the same crime market.

EXTENT

OMCGs have featured prominently in political and public discussions of organised crime in Australia in recent years. This is often because along with being structured and enduring, OMCGs are more publicly visible and identifiable than many other groups involved in organised crime.

However, it is difficult to gauge the percentage of organised crime attributed specifically to OMCG members. While they are prevalent in all states and territories, they are just one part of the broader and integrated picture of organised crime groups in Australia.

OMCGs' activities are, for the most part, domestic. However, gangs do cooperate with

other chapters abroad and with sophisticated and high threat organised crime groups operating in Australia and internationally.

The most recent assessment of OMCGs identified that there are currently 39 OMCGs operating in Australia, with the number of patched members as high as 4000. This number expands significantly when considering nominees, prospective members and associates. The total club and membership numbers of Australian OMCGs are rising.

HOW ORGANISED MOTORCYCLE GANGS WORK

OMCGs are evolving in response to changes in the criminal environment and attempts by law enforcement to counter their criminal activities. Some OMCG members are becoming more sophisticated and dynamic in their criminal activities and a number of OMCGs are expanding in their size, scope and influence.

While OMCG members play a prominent role in Australia's domestic production of amphetamine-type stimulants, they are also involved in other illicit drug markets, vehicle rebirthing and firearms trafficking. Some OMCG members have demonstrated a capacity for strategic planning and their activities now include committing serious frauds, money laundering, extortion, prostitution, property crime and bribing and corrupting officials.

Like all members of society, some members of OMCGs may own or have interests in outwardly legitimate businesses, including in the finance, transport, private security, entertainment, natural resources and construction industries. However in a number of instances, these interests have also been used to facilitate organised crime.

OMCGs are also no longer isolationist groups. They may provide their 'expertise' or 'services' to traditional organised crime groups on a contractual basis in order to establish a presence in a crime market or to facilitate the



commission of a crime. This might include debt collection, extortion, blackmail, intimidation and violence.⁷

OMCGs themselves also hire or recruit external expertise when needed. They may rely on professionals such as lawyers, accountants, chemists and real estate agents to assist in their crimes or to create complicated structures that hide the proceeds of their crimes. As OMCGs become more sophisticated they are also taking advice from public relations consultants to improve their public image and actively collaborating to mount legal challenges to legislation aimed at disrupting their criminal activities.

They often recruit street gangs to undertake the higher risk aspects of their criminal enterprise, and have been known to enter into partnerships with ethnic-based criminal organisations to distribute drugs or commit other crimes. These connections with more traditional crime groups appear more prevalent and reflect the more diverse ethnic composition of some OMCG chapters.

LINKS TO OTHER CRIME TYPES

Members of OMCGs are involved in many aspects of serious crime in Australia. These include:

- > production and distribution of drugs
- > vehicle rebirthing
- > serious assault

- > use and trafficking of illegal firearms
- > serious frauds
- > money laundering
- > extortion
- > prostitution
- > robbery
- > organised theft
- > property crime
- > bribing and corrupting officials
- > tax evasion
- > arson.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The Australian Government launched the Organised Crime Strategic Framework in November 2009 to ensure Commonwealth agencies are working together to prevent, disrupt, investigate and prosecute organised crime. As part of the Framework, the ACC has produced two biennial classified Organised Crime Threat Assessments (OCTAs) which identify the highest organised crime threats to the Australian community. The OCTA informed the development of the Government's inaugural Commonwealth Organised Crime Response Plan (OCRCP) in 2010 to help prioritise Commonwealth agencies resources against these threats.

Recognising that organised crime is a national issue that requires a nationally coordinated response, the Commonwealth and the States and Territories agreed to the National OCRCP 2010-13 in 2010 to strengthen multi-jurisdictional approaches, coordination,

information sharing and joint activities to combat the national threat of serious and organised crime. Preventative partnerships with industry and the community are part of the strategies to respond to organised crime. These organised crime fact sheets describe the breadth and impact of organised crime activities and provide an insight into how industry and the community can help combat organised crime.

Further information on the Organised Crime Strategic Framework and the OCRCP can be found at <http://www.ag.gov.au/www/agd/agd.nsf/Page/Publications_OrganisedCrime>.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lozusic, R 2003, *Gangs in NSW*, Briefing paper number 16/02; NSW Parliamentary Library Research Service. Accessed at <[http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/publications.nsf/0/A2BB6389AAD0ECF1CA256ECF00097F59/\\$File/16-02.pdf](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/publications.nsf/0/A2BB6389AAD0ECF1CA256ECF00097F59/$File/16-02.pdf)>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Barker, T 2005, 'One Percent Biker Clubs, A Description', *Trends in Organized Crime*, 9 (1): 111, doi:10.1007/s12117-005-1005-0, ISSN 1084-4791, Springer, New York.
- 4 Schloenhardt, A 2007, *The market for amphetamine-type stimulants and their precursors in Oceania*, Australian Institute of Criminology, p. 32. Accessed <<http://www.aic.gov.au/documents/7/F/8/%7B7F8A14E8-D893-4D3F-BFE0-DCAE3B2A035C%7Drpp81.pdf>>.
- 5 'Australia's biker gangs wage violent turf war' 2007, Reuters, 11 May. Accessed at <<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSSYD164420070511>>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.